Closing the gap by enhancing employment opportunities for Indigenous ex-prisoners and offenders

Professor Joe Graffam
Dr Alison Shinkfield
Deakin Forensic Psychology Centre
Deakin University

Abstract

This presentation commences with a description of a wide range of conditions of disadvantage that are known to contribute to the gap between non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians in quality of life and opportunity. The specific emphasis is on conditions relevant to ex-prisoners and offenders. Examples of ‘what works’ are provided, incorporating descriptions of mainstream and Indigenous-specific programs that are currently in place and effective in providing employment assistance to Indigenous ex-prisoners and offenders. Next, systemic issues affecting success in employment for this group are identified, as are facilitators and barriers to success in obtaining and maintaining employment. Strategies for promoting sustainable employment are then discussed. The presentation concludes with presentation of a holistic model of support that includes development of integrated local support networks.
Introduction

Employment is an important element of successful integration within one’s community. Across Australia, nearly two-thirds of prisoners were unemployed when they committed the crimes for which they were incarcerated. For Indigenous and non-Indigenous ex-prisoners alike, there are numerous benefits associated with employment. Those benefits relate to the individual (for example, increased earning capacity, improved prospects for sustained employment, increased social contact, improved self-esteem and confidence, improved financial conditions and less idle time) and to their family (for example, greater self-sufficiency, better lifestyle, provision of financial assistance to family networks), as well as wider system benefits, including reduced likelihood of reoffending and reimprisonment which relates to improved public safety and lower cost of criminal justice.

This presentation discusses the issues surrounding employment of Indigenous ex-prisoners, existing support programs, and strategies to improve employment after release from correctional institutions. To be effective, programs and strategies need to acknowledge the social and cultural origins of disadvantage for Indigenous offenders. We give an overview of what works in overcoming Indigenous disadvantage and focus on regional and urban programs that assist in employment of Indigenous offenders. A model is proposed for development of local integrated networked systems of support for reintegration.

It is important to frame this presentation in terms of our theoretical perspective. Two underlying precepts that the authors bring include a focus on reintegration rather than rehabilitation and application of an ecological analysis to investigation of the reintegration process. Although the word “rehabilitation” literally refers to regaining possession (of one’s life), in use offender rehabilitation has, to a large extent, adopted a pathology focus which emphasises treatment of character defects and skill deficits. Closely akin to Ward’s ‘Good Lives Model’ (for example, Ward & Brown, 2004, 2010; Ward, Collie & Bourke, 2009), a focus on reintegration entails consideration of the whole person and also considers that person ‘in context’. Treating the context within which an individual lives as a dynamic and interactive ecological system is necessary in our view to understanding the complex and difficult process of reintegration within community (Graffam, Shinkfield, Lavelle & McPherson, 2002, 2004; Graffam, Shinkfield, Mihailides & Lavelle, 2005).

Background

Prevalence of Indigenous offending

Indigenous people are disproportionately represented in the Australian correctional systems (e.g. ABS 2010; SCRGSP 2011). Currently, Indigenous prisoners represent 28.3% of Australia’s prisoner population (SCRGSP 2011), about 10 times their representation in the Australian general population. More than 90 per cent of Indigenous prisoners are male (ABS 2010). As well as being over-represented in correctional systems, the rate of imprisonment of Indigenous Australians is much greater than non-Indigenous Australians. The national age standardised imprisonment rate for Indigenous adults is 1,811.1 per 100,000, about 14 times greater than the national rate for non-Indigenous adults at 127.1 per 100,000 (SCRGSP 2011). Like their non-Indigenous counterparts, Indigenous offenders are characterised by high rates of repeated short-term incarceration (ABS 2010). As well, there is
an over-representation of Indigenous males convicted of a violent crime, with alcohol and substance use linked to this outcome (Willis & Moore 2008).

**Origins of disadvantage for Indigenous offenders**

A complex array of social and cultural factors contributes to Indigenous offending behaviour and also creates barriers to successful community reintegration. While many of these factors are also experienced by the general Australian community and by non-Indigenous ex-prisoners, their effect may be greater for Indigenous people and, in particular, Indigenous offenders seeking to reintegrate into the community and achieve sustained employment.

These factors include, but are not limited to:

- poor physical and mental health
- drug and alcohol use
- financial stress, limited finance and conditions of poverty
- insufficient literacy skills and/or low educational attainment
- unstable, unsafe or crowded housing
- family dysfunction, social alienation and low or inadequate social support.

Indigenous Australians experience significant physical and mental health problems, with higher prevalence observed for asthma, diabetes, physical disability and kidney disease than non-Indigenous Australians (SCRGSP 2011). Among Indigenous prison entrants, there is evidence of higher rates of communicable diseases (such as hepatitis B and C) and some chronic conditions (for example, diabetes) than for non-Indigenous prison entrants (AIHW 2010). Hospitalisation rates for physical health problems and mental disorders are also much higher among Indigenous ex-prisoners than non-Indigenous ex-prisoners and the general population (Hobbs et al. 2006).

Indigenous Australians consume less alcohol on average than non-Indigenous Australians but are more likely to engage in harmful drinking that places them at risk of serious short-term and long-term health problems and alcohol-related harm (e.g. AIHW 2010; Gray & Wilkes 2010). Indigenous offenders are also more likely than non-Indigenous offenders to have been alcohol-dependent before their arrest (Makkai & Payne 2003; Putt et al. 2005). Although rates of illegal drug use are lower for Indigenous offenders, in particular poly-drug use (Makkai & Payne 2003), there are indications that Indigenous offenders are more likely to be dependent on cannabis and alcohol (e.g. Putt et al. 2005).

Limited finance and/or conditions of poverty also create a condition of disadvantage that may have flow-on effects for employment. Indigenous offenders are at high risk of financial stress, which may underpin contact with the criminal justice system (Weatherburn et al. 2006). Indigenous Australians are less likely to receive adequate formal education, and those who do consistently score below national minimum standards in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 reading, writing and numeracy compared with non-Indigenous students. The retention rate of Indigenous students from the start of secondary school until Year 10 is, at 90.9% (in 2009), also typically lower compared with the 99.8% for all students (SCRGSP 2011). Being Indigenous and an early school-leaver is a risk factor for imprisonment (Weatherburn et al. 2006).
The most pressing issue facing a newly released ex-prisoner is accommodation. Many ex-prisoners have great difficulty finding and maintaining stable accommodation (Melbourne Criminology Research and Evaluation Unit 2003), with problematic drug use and reincarceration a common outcome of unstable and unsafe accommodation (Baldry et al. 2003)—all of which may make it even more difficult to obtain and sustain employment. Indigenous Australians generally have poorer housing conditions than the general Australian population, with overcrowding identified as a particular concern (SCRGP 2011). Housing conditions for Indigenous ex-prisoners may also be unstable, with homelessness a common feature (Baldry et al. 2006). Social networks, too, are critical to successful community re-entry for prisoners. Ex-prisoners typically have a limited social network that consists, in many cases, of friends who have been in prison or who have participated in criminal activity (La Vigne et al. 2004). This is also the case for Indigenous offenders returning to the community.

While the issues faced by Indigenous female offenders are much the same, Indigenous women also typically experience higher rates of substance use and mental health problems than non-Indigenous women, as well as reporting long histories of sexual and/or physical abuse (e.g. AIHW0 2010; Hobbs et al. 2006).

**Employment disadvantage**

It is well established that ex-prisoners as a group are underemployed compared with the general population (e.g. Melbourne Criminology Research and Evaluation Unit 2003). Indigenous working-age Australians have a much lower employment participation rate than the non-Indigenous population. Actual unemployment is higher among Indigenous Australians than among the general community, especially in rural and remote areas (ABS 2009). In 2009, the unemployment rate for Indigenous Australians was 18% compared to 5% for non-Indigenous Australians, with many Indigenous Australians long-term unemployed. There is, of course, some variation by location. In major cities, the unemployment rate for Indigenous people was 19%, compared to 20% in regional areas, and 10% in remote areas (ABS 2009), although the latter figure should be interpreted with caution given high sampling errors.

When criminal history is taken into account, the picture is even more disconcerting; in fact, the disparity in arrest rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians may account for at least 20% of the difference in employment rates between these two groups (Borland & Hunter 2000). Moreover, unemployment is higher among Indigenous Australians who have been arrested within the past 5 years (29%) than among Indigenous persons who were not arrested (11%) in that time (ABS 2007). Given research evidence that unemployment is related to reoffending and revocation (Baldry et al. 2003; Webster et al. 2001), it is clearly important that Indigenous ex-prisoners receive the support they need to become employed, productive and integrated members of their communities.

Ex-prisoners generally have poor work histories and are typically employed in low-wage jobs with few tangible rewards. There are numerous identified barriers to employment that may affect Indigenous and non-Indigenous ex-prisoners (Graffam et al. 2008; Graffam et al. 2005; Webster et al. 2001). These include:

- a lack of personal and work-related skills
- educational disadvantage/low literacy levels
- unfavourable employer attitudes (resistance related to ex-prisoners and crime)
• racism on the part of employers
• lack of work opportunities in their neighbourhood/community
• lack of job contacts because of segregated social networks
• financial difficulties affecting interview/job
• problems making the transition from benefits to employment
• behavioural problems
• lack of basic skills and/or poor qualifications
• low self-esteem, confidence and motivation
• absent or poor work experience history
• difficulty adjusting to the routine of work.

Current employment assistance programs

Indigenous offenders are eligible for numerous and varied employment-related programs before and after release from a correctional institution. The Commonwealth Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) funded system, Job Services Australia, provides mainstream and specialist employment services for which ex-prisoners and offenders are eligible. State and territory correctional services offer in-prison programs, including prison-industry training and a wide range of vocational training and education courses. Transition and post-release programs often include vocational training and education, plus employment assistance for job seeking and even post-placement support. In practice, such programs may be employment-specific or part of a holistic program in which employment is one component of a broad program agenda. In short, with respect to Indigenous-specific and Indigenous ex-offender-specific employment services, there is a range of services available, some Commonwealth funded, some state and territory funded, and some industry funded.

DEEWR - JSA

In regard to employment assistance after release from correctional institutions, Job Services Australia (JSA) is the national network of DEEWR-funded employment service providers. It provides individualised employment assistance through a variety of case management models. Indigenous offenders are eligible to participate in mainstream JSA programs. There is also a small number of specialist JSA employment services contracted to assist offenders. Similarly, individualised services are provided through case management models. Indigenous offenders are also eligible for these. Annual figures suggest generally favourable employment outcomes for Indigenous job seekers under the former Job Network (now JSA) model (Dockery & Milsom 2007).

From the commencement of JSA in July, 2009, through March, 2011, ex-offender job seekers have constituted approximately 11 per cent of total caseload. Approximately 22 per cent of ex-offender job seekers have been Indigenous ex-offenders. Over that period, 87,472 ex-offender job placements were achieved, with Indigenous ex-offenders accounting for 16% of the total. With respect to 13 week outcomes, 27,069 ex-offender outcomes were achieved, with Indigenous ex-offenders accounting for 16% of the total. With respect to 26 week
outcomes, 13,985 ex-offender outcomes were achieved, with Indigenous ex-offenders accounting for 15% of the total. As one can see, although somewhat under-represented in the outcomes, Indigenous ex-offenders have been effectively assisted into employment by JSAs (figures courtesy of DEEWR).

As well as funding the entire network of JSAs, DEEWR provides the Indigenous Employment Program (IEP) which funds a broad range of program initiatives throughout Australia. The IEP funds programs aimed at employers, job seekers and employees, Indigenous communities, industry bodies, and employer groups, as well as Indigenous entrepreneurs for development of sustainable businesses. Project funding is provided through a panel of service deliverers. Although these sources of employment assistance have proven reasonably effective for Indigenous Australians generally, the non-specialist approach may be less effective with Indigenous ex-prisoners. The number of Indigenous-specific employment services is very small, however. The reformed IEP began with the introduction of JSA in 2009, and in its first year approximately 12,000 Indigenous Australians were placed in employment, with another 14,000 engaged in training and other activities (DEEWR, 2010). IEP figures for Indigenous ex-prisoners and offenders were not available for this paper.

In a review of mainstream Indigenous employment programs in Australia, including the former Job Network, Dockery and Milsom (2007) reported that the main programs directed specifically toward Indigenous job seekers appeared to have been effective in promoting employment outcomes, at least in the short-term. Important features of these programs included a mix of on-the-job work experience (via wage subsidies or brokered placements), in combination with other support (e.g. mentoring). Like Willis and Moore (2008), the authors recognised that the inclusion of Indigenous staff in program or service delivery was beneficial.

---

**A Job Services Australia provider working specifically with Indigenous jobseekers. The program is not specific to Indigenous offenders.**

**Tangentyere Employment Service (TES)—Tangentyere Council**

TES is a Specialist Indigenous Provider for the Town Camps of Alice Springs. It has 10% of the total number of Indigenous jobseekers in Central Australia with approximately 500 clients. TES main office is located at 10 Brown Street, Alice Springs. Tangentyere’s JSA has a unique service delivery model which includes two campervans set up as mobile offices, to service clients in the town camps. Weekly visits are made to each town camp, with attempts to meet with each client on a fortnightly basis. This business model has allowed Tangentyere Council to integrate its several services and better assist jobseekers.

As at 30 June 2010 TES had commenced over 90% of its caseload of clients into its system. Achieving this level of commencements is extremely impressive. It would be remarkable for a metropolitan provider, let alone an outback provider. To achieve this so early into a contract is a credit to the JSA team. As at 30 June 2010, TES had placed 241 clients into employment, with over half of these still in employment. This is again a remarkable outcome for a provider which has a business allocation of only 10% of the Employment Service Area clients and constitutes over 30% of all placements by all providers in Central Australia. As a result of this standout performance, **Tangentyere Employment Services was awarded 5 Stars by DEEWR.**
Mainstream employment service that provides a range of employment programs, including Fresh Start, for Indigenous and non-Indigenous ex-offenders and pre-release prisoners.

**PVS Workfind**

PVS Workfind provides a holistic service to job seekers and works collaboratively with community agencies, not-for-profit service providers and government and non-government organisations. PVS Workfind is a large employment service provider operating across the full range of Commonwealth-funded programs. It has three specialty divisions:

- PVS Workfind, JSA
- PVS Workfind Disability Employment Service
- PVS Workfind Indigenous Services, which provides Indigenous job seekers with five key services, including initial assessment, pre-employment support services, employment placement services and cross-cultural training for employers, and access to an Indigenous mentor, who provides at least 26 weeks post-placement support. These services are aimed at Indigenous job seekers generally, but Indigenous ex-offenders may also access these services.

To help achieve sustainable employment outcomes, specialised training programs have been developed, including Fresh Start, for Indigenous and non-Indigenous ex-offenders and pre-release prisoners.


DEEWR also provides a pre-release employment preparation program for prisoners for which Indigenous prisoners are eligible. Although pre-release only programs present certain difficulties, particularly due to the prevalence of short sentences, transition programs that begin pre-release and continue for several months post-release, with clearly stated program objectives and individualised assistance have been shown to lead to successful reintegration.

**Pre-Release Prisoner Program—DEEWR**

The PRP initiative aims to maximise employment opportunities for people leaving prison and reduce their reliance on welfare by improving job search skills and building connections with employers at the earliest opportunity. Job seekers are generally eligible for PRP if they are within their last 12 months of their sentence, are considered to be work ready, and satisfy pre-release status requirements by their State / Territory Corrective Services. From 1 September 2006, prisoners participating in Pre-Release Prisoner (PRP) programs, including Indigenous prisoners, who are available for work on partial or full day release have had access to the full range of employment services. If there are JSA providers available in the area who have established linkages or agreements with Corrective Services to work with PRP job seekers, the PRP job seeker is eligible for referral to one of these JSA providers.
State and Territory-funded employment programs

In addition to the Commonwealth-funded services, there are several state and territory funded employment focused services. The cases presented are not an exhaustive set, rather they provide illustrations of the types of services provided from the various sources of funding.

Examples of employment-focused programs for minimum-risk, job-ready prisoners within 12 months of release. The programs are not specific to Indigenous offenders.

Prisoner Employment Program—Department of Corrective Services, Western Australia.

- This is a five-stage program, comprising application, assessment, case management, placement and post-placement support. It is a pre-release to post-release program.
- Participants must have completed more than half their sentence.
- Paid employment is at award levels, with all standard clearances (police check, workers compensation cover etc.)
- The program operates from nine locations in Western Australia, including metropolitan and regional prisons.

The program has been successful in placing ex-prisoners in employment after their release from prison, but the extent of involvement and employment outcomes of Indigenous offenders is not known at this time.

For more information, contact the Department of Corrective Services, WA

Prisoner Employment Program—Northern Territory Correctional Services.

The Prisoner Employment Program has three distinct tiers: the Community Service Work Parties (CSWP), The Volunteer Employment Program (VEP), and The Prisoner Paid Employment Program (PEP). This program has shown considerable success in helping prisoners make the transition from prison to the community. For example, in the past 12 months since the PEP was restarted, 16 prisoners have participated in full-time paid employment, seven have participated in paid training programs (with two achieving full-time paid employment on completion of their sentence) and an average of 4 to 6 prisoners are on paid employment each month. Nearly two-thirds (65%) of PEP participants are Indigenous.

For more information, contact the Northern Territory Correctional Services

Advance2Work

Advance2Work, formerly the Pre-Release Employment Assistance Program has been operating across Queensland since 2000. The program provides support from five locations to prisoners who are released from all custodial centre locations in Queensland. To be eligible, prisoners must begin the program within six months preceding release. Program
providers are expected to ensure that the participant profile is representative of the state’s prisoner population. The program provides a range of employment related supports including training needs analysis, vocational training, job search skills development, job placement, post employment support, and referral to other services.

A review of program performance between July, 2007 and December, 2009 (30 months) was conducted in 2010. During that period, 7,460 persons were assisted by the program with 1,918 (25.7%) placed into employment and 1,337 (17.9%) retaining employment for at least 13 weeks. Of the total program participants, 2,063 (27.7%) were Indigenous. Of the total achieving 13 weeks of continuous employment, 232 (17.4%) were Indigenous. This performance is comparable with mainstream Job Services Australia performance, and the effectiveness of the program in supporting Indigenous participants, although lower than for non-Indigenous, is very good.

For more information, contact the Queensland Corrective Services.

Industry-funded employment programs

Industry-funded employment training programs may also be effective in improving employment outcomes for Indigenous ex-prisoners.

Example of an employment-specific program tailored for and operated by Indigenous people. This program is not specific to Indigenous offenders.

**JobTrainWA**

JobTrainWA is an Indigenous-owned and -operated program in Western Australia that provides training pertinent to Indigenous ex-offenders. Its main focus is on preparation and placement for work in the mining industry. The program is tailored for the Indigenous community and offers training in: Certificate I and II Business; cross-cultural awareness training; Aboriginal school-based training; pre-employment training; and the IEP.


**Mining industry**

While not specific to Indigenous offenders, the mining industry in Western Australia is working in partnership with local Indigenous support services to improve the general wellbeing of Indigenous communities and their education and employment skills, with a long-term view to increasing employment opportunities for Indigenous people in the mining industry. In South Australia, OZ Minerals offers a pre-employment training program to local Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, with all graduates offered guaranteed employment. In Western Australia and the Northern Territory, Rio Tinto has a similar work-training program for Indigenous people that engages Indigenous ex-prisoners.

Facilitators and barriers to employment

In-prison programs can provide valuable employment-relevant skill acquisition; however, nationally and internationally, low participation rates in vocational training and education programs within prisons remain a problem. The low proportion of Indigenous and non-Indigenous prisoners achieving a certification or qualification may be explained to some extent by the impact of typically short sentences on program participation. Also, there are long waiting lists for courses, indicating that demand is much higher than availability. Clearly, there is an urgent need to improve program participation in prisons so that individuals leave prison with a skill base that can improve their chances of successful employment after release. Policy and program reform is also urgently needed to reduce waiting lists for courses and to increase resources to provide vocational training and education.

In a review of programs in Australian prisons, Howells et al. (2004) suggested a range of program improvements specific to Indigenous offenders, including the need to meet the training needs of the majority of prisoners who have short sentences, to consider language difficulties (for example, where English may be a second or third language and use of jargon) and to recognise the diversity of Indigenous cultures and the subsequent need for guidance from local Indigenous groups. There is also evidence that male Indigenous prisoners may prefer male facilitators (Willis & Moore 2008).

Researchers have identified the key qualities of successful post-release employment programs (Borzycki, 2005). These include networking with the labour market, modifying recruitment and placement procedures in line with labour market needs, providing employer incentives, as well as providing information about job opportunities, appropriate vocational training, work-release opportunities for suitable offenders, job retention skills, assistance to offenders in appropriate disclosure of criminal history, and long-term follow-up support.

In addition to the need for employment assistance, there is the issue of stakeholder attitudes toward the employability of Indigenous and non-Indigenous ex-prisoners. Employers, employment service providers and corrective services staff have been shown to rate the employment prospects of ex-prisoners as poor (Graffam et al. 2008), with variations related to the type of crime and whether training had been completed in prison. Attitude change can be promoted by exposing employers and employment service providers to ex-prisoners through job fairs and work trials, and by marketing success stories. Employer incentives have also been shown to be effective in warming employers to hiring Indigenous people (Giddy et al. 2009) and ex-prisoners (for example, The Bridge Project 2011).

In any case, progress must be understood and managed in terms of small steps. Ex-prisoners generally require a slow rate of change to maintain more-or-less stable progress, and even then progress is likely to be difficult (Graffam et al. 2005). It is unreasonable to expect six-week rehabilitation programs, or so-called ‘intensive assistance’, to be either intense or long enough to produce lasting results. Those providing employment assistance should also take into account the frequent interdependence of employment, housing, drug and alcohol treatment, and family and social network support needs, when structuring and delivering support.

Beyond what is suggested about performance by the JSA star rating system, the effectiveness of mainstream and specialist employment services in assisting Indigenous ex-prisoners to gain employment and other program goals compared with non-Indigenous participants is
not well documented. Few evaluations of ‘best practice’ and effectiveness of employment services for Indigenous ex-offenders have been conducted, and there is a resultant lack of specific knowledge of employment programs for Indigenous ex-prisoners. However, evaluation has been viewed as particularly important (Gilbert & Wilson, 2009). Program evaluation is a critical component of ensuring program integrity. The short-term, ‘pilot’ status of many programs has made thorough evaluation difficult.

There is evidence that numerous program-related factors either facilitate success or are barriers to it in employing Indigenous offenders. In short, effective employment programs should:

- be designed specifically for Indigenous offenders and any subgroups within the Indigenous offender community
- have the support of, and include input from, the local Indigenous community
- be culturally sensitive and appropriate
- include provision for long-term support
- use a strong case management approach
- be part of a planned, integrated set of services designed to meet the wide-ranging, complex needs of Indigenous offenders
- have adequate resourcing and support that can be sustained beyond ‘pilot’ project status
- include scope for both process and outcome evaluation to better understand the extent to which the program is appropriate for, and addresses the needs of, Indigenous offenders, and to understand the effect of the program on recidivism
- include an analysis of program cost-effectiveness.

Generally speaking, barriers to providing effective employment programs for Indigenous offenders are the opposite of the facilitators above. Additional barriers include:

- short-term or inadequate funding arrangements
- lack of coordination between agencies and/or lack of integrated services
- poor uptake of and retention in appropriate programs
- reduced availability of appropriate programs/services in rural and remote areas
- lack of up-to-date research and of evaluation of promising programs.

**Strategies to promote sustainable employment**

Strategies for promoting sustainable employment for Indigenous ex-prisoners can be identified from existing literature and emerging employment service models and practices. These strategies are not mutually exclusive. They involve:

- incorporating a culturally appropriate focus with culturally relevant methods of service delivery, as well as involving Indigenous elders and community members in the design and delivery of the program
- from an ‘infrastructure’ perspective, strengthening family and community connections to the employment service and encouraging individual program participants, family
members and elders to be active agents in the reintegration process locally—this can include a mentoring component

• developing a ‘social enterprise’ employment model based on local business opportunities that involves apprenticeships, trade certification, career advancement and prospects of spin-off businesses from the original enterprise

• developing local networked transition support programs that include all of the appropriate elements of the model described above with the required local network facilitation

• using a case management model to ensure that individualised attention is given and that an appropriate support package is provided to program participants.

• tailoring employment preparation to locally available job opportunities, individual readiness, and availability of resources for support.

A holistic approach to employment assistance

Having noted the extent of disadvantage, the range of programs available and some of the good work being done, together with the multiple factors that can facilitate or impede employment success, there is clearly much more to be done to help Indigenous ex-prisoners obtain and maintain employment and reintegrate into their communities. Acknowledging the depth of change required to transform a life, and that self-sufficiency is an ambiguous point well along the developmental path, is essential to building a support system that will serve Indigenous ex-prisoners. Given the complexity, multiplicity and pervasiveness of disadvantage among Indigenous and non-Indigenous ex-prisoners, comprehensive local networks of formal and informal support are needed. A support model that provides individualised case management is ideal. Such a model accounts for the diverse and often dynamic needs of individuals and can accommodate differing rates of progress.

As an example, vocational training should often begin with short courses that provide tangible outcomes such as certificates or licences. Longer-term training for Indigenous ex-prisoners should be considered in reference to ‘readiness’, and not simply desire. Employment, too, should be approached with an expectation of gradual progress. That may mean work ‘trials’ with an employer, volunteer work for some time to build general work skills, and minimum part-time paid employment as possible starting points. Such activities can contribute to skill development and the development of a useful résumé to obtain more substantial and ongoing paid employment.

Because the real issue for many Indigenous and non-Indigenous ex-prisoners is not merely employment, but lifestyle change, a comprehensive and individualised approach is important. It is also important to integrate the ‘pieces’ of an individualised approach into a whole, so that a cohort of individuals can be supported, each in terms of their needs. For these reasons, an integrated local support system of networked providers, organised and managed well and using an individualised case management model, can provide the means to achieve sustainable, positive lifestyle change for Indigenous and non-Indigenous ex-prisoners.

Such a system would be structured through a central transition support program that coordinates and case manages support services for individuals. The model for this program is shown in Chart 1 below. The ‘?’ in the model is meant to indicate that it is an open system that can accommodate any number of additional ‘pieces’ as required or are available. In the
case of many Indigenous participants, the ‘?’ is likely to include elders and community members.

Chart 1: An integrated system of holistic support

Conclusion

Unemployment is strongly related to offending and incarceration, in Australia and internationally. Indigenous Australians have significantly higher rates of unemployment and underemployment than non-Indigenous Australians. Offending and incarceration rates are also higher for Indigenous Australians. A complex mix of social and cultural factors contributes to Indigenous offending behaviour. It also creates significant barriers to successful post-release reintegration and contributes to the employment disadvantage of Indigenous offenders.

This presentation demonstrates that there are some standout regional and urban employment programs that effectively support employment of Indigenous offenders. The most successful programs demonstrate that sustained, intensive formal assistance improves employment outcomes for this group. Moreover, they have shown the value of a comprehensive and individualised case management approach. As well, the design, development and delivery of culturally appropriate programs show success in terms of employment outcomes and program completion rates.
There is a recognised shortfall in culturally specific programs for Indigenous offenders (Howells et al. 2004). We cannot assume that mainstream employment programs developed for the general population or for the general offender population are appropriate for Indigenous offenders. To be effective, mainstream employment programs need to be adapted to incorporate Indigenous knowledge and practices, and legitimised by using Indigenous facilitators and elders to provide them (refer Willis & Moore 2008).

There is a need for more Indigenous-specific employment programs for Indigenous ex-prisoners, especially those serving shorter sentences, and for the engagement of Indigenous staff delivering those services. It is also clear that there is a need to work with employers to promote the employment of ex-prisoners and align recruitment/placement procedures with labour market needs, individual readiness, and available support.

We propose the following broad strategies to improve employment outcomes for Indigenous ex-prisoners:

- incorporate culturally relevant and appropriate methods of service delivery, and involve Indigenous community members and elders in the design and delivery of the program
- improve availability of employment programs for Indigenous prisoners serving short custodial sentences
- strengthen family and community connections to the employment service and encourage active agency in the reintegration process locally
- develop ‘social enterprises’ as a basis of employment opportunities
- develop an ‘open system’ integrated local support network for Indigenous ex-prisoners that is operated on the basis of an individualised case management model
- tailoring employment preparation to locally available job opportunities, individual readiness, and availability of resources for support.
References


Acknowledgments

This review was prepared by Professor Joseph Graffam (Pro-Vice Chancellor [Research Development and Training], Deakin University) and Dr Alison Shinkfield (Research Fellow, School of Psychology, Deakin University). The contribution of Jenny Crosbie and the program providers is gratefully acknowledged, as well as the valuable feedback from members of the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse Board and Scientific Reference Group. The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and may not reflect those of the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, the Australian Institute of Family Studies, the Australian Government or any Australian state/territory government.

Terminology

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Indigenous are used interchangeably to refer to Australian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and may not reflect those of the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, the Australian Institute of Family Studies, the Australian Government or any Australian state/territory government.